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THE END OF THE BEGINNING OF THE OLIGARCHIC EMPIRE OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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For the past several decades we have witnessed the beginnings of the end of the United States as an electoral democracy. There's no need to list all the features of top-down oligarchic empire that have taken hold during those years, since the list is well known. The means of oppression and exploitation have been laid on with increasing effectiveness by a mushrooming brotherhood of billionaires and their political and judicial servitors.

Even more ominous is that the passing of Justice Ginsburg and the threat of her replacement by a nominee of the Federalist Society may mark the end of the beginning of the United States as an enduring oligarchic empire. This advent of this nightmare appears to be approaching certainty, given that it takes no special insight to see what, under the changed circumstances, we should expect from a 6-to-3 conservative SCOTUS in the next several decades. It's another obvious list.

Given the looming existential threat, certainly in the coming days we should do all we can to put relentless pressure on vulnerable senators to oppose a lame-duck Trump replacement of Justice Ginsburg, support stacking the Court in a Biden administration if such a replacement is made, and do anything else we can that might help stop the Republican villainy.

But what if none of it stops Trump and McConnell from having their way? Undoubtedly, a new Biden administration will be fighting several major battles in the midst of historic division and volatile civil unrest in the country, with constant legal grenades thrown by the Republicans—all of which would hardly leave much wherewithal to take on yet another Herculean fight to pack the Court. And of course, that possibility assumes Democratic control of the Senate, which even now is not a certainty.

Perhaps we have arrived at the point where those of us who are thinking about what it may yet mean personally to pay the price of patriotic activism, ought to recalibrate our strategic vision. If a sixth seat on the Court is given to a right-wing ideologue, unreconstructed expectations that the conventional model of progressive community organizing will be sufficient to combat

the future initiatives of the reactionary right might fairly be regarded as hope-springs-infernal fantasies.

If Justice Ginsburg's seat is filled by the Republican Senate before the election, it's doubtful that many progressive legal reforms will be won through federal action, at least for the remainder of this century. The probability of that demoralizing outcome is strongly suggested by the ages of the current Court members and their ideological biases. The next justice likely to be replaced will not be a conservative but the 81-year old, liberal-leaning Stephen Breyer. Failing to adapt to this emerging historical reality could doom progressive organizing to symbolic rear-guard actions that would eventually come to be regarded as well-intentioned but futile gestures that only served to chronicle the death of American democracy.

If in the coming decades, long after a Biden administration, we have to face the loss of any meaningful legislative and policy successes from the top down and a SCOTUS rollback of what has already been won—whether for human, voting, or First-Amendment rights, racial justice, universal health care, environmental protection, renewable energy, economic regulation, etc.—what will we take up as a plausible strategic vision for progressive community organizing?

The ultimate verity in the oncoming political miasma is that the only means to dethrone economically entrenched oligarchic power is to counter it with the force of public powers exercised by the demos—not by partisan parties, themselves in hock to the oligarchs, mass demonstrations, or the conventional variety of community organizing.

Has there ever been more certain historical evidence that progressive forces must take up what will be a decades-long struggle to build *institutionalized* grassroots political power? Our era is no different in kind and needed response than what the early labor movement faced in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Then the robber barons of industrialization were hell-bent on imposing their version of top-down oligarchic empire on the citizenry.

What was the remedy in that era, when the Supreme Court and much of the federal government were marching in reactionary lock-step? Labor's strategy was to build organizations from the bottom up that eventually could wield institutional power against the oppressive oligarchic forces. The institutional rubric at that time was "union." The power of the movement was seeded in countless "locals," created over a half-century by paying the price of face-to-face workplace organizing, which was not deterred by legislative and judicial injustice and physical violence. They eventually unified in the political juggernaut of the combined national industrial unions of the CIO and the craft unions of the AFL. And what they eventually accomplished after a half-century of intense struggle came to be called "social development," because it permanently uplifted the lives of tens of millions throughout the entire society, reaching far beyond the unions' members.

As hopeful as we might be about union organizing, it's a stretch to imagine successfully recreating labor's heyday. Given the present realities of corporate power and the anti-union bias of an increasingly conservative judiciary, it's far-fetched to imagine that the desperately needed empowerment of the demos could be brought about by revitalizing the union movement. Never mind rebuilding the institutions of democracy, union-based campaigns for equality, equity, and accountability of the federal government and global corporations would, in all probability, be doomed before they could be imagined. Launching such campaigns would seemingly have to ignore that the workers would be cut off at the knees legally and economically if they even remotely threatened corporate profits and the overlords of the advancing empire.

Going forward with any hope of success must certainly demand clear-eyed recognition that we are already in the first century of the *Oligarchic Empire of the United States of America*. This is no longer a theoretical possibility; it's a done deal. Is there any uncorrupted institutional force left that we can rely on to stop the billionaire brotherhood from continuing to strengthen the powers of their oligarchy against the forces of democracy? If so, try naming it. Surely we should not be waiting for the money-corrupted Congress or power-grasping Presidency to save American democracy. The best we have any reason to hope for from them in the

foreseeable future is mollifying liberal legislation and policy from time to time. The most demoralizing aspect of this transposition of our government from electoral democracy to oligarchic empire, crushing the moral-spiritual soul of the nation, is that it's being done with the imprimatur of legally constituted authority.

Fortunately, defeating Trump and retaking the Senate seem more likely if Trump and McConnell manage to replace Justice Ginsburg before the election. On the other hand, while the abiding threat to democracy may be obscured by the euphoria of an electoral victory this year, it will not be obliterated. And, unfortunately, it seems likely that the forces of progressive change will not unify and respond as one to the fact that we have arrived at the end of the beginning of oligarchic empire, that the organizing model of the last half-century is doomed to historic failure in the coming decades; and that while grassroots organizing will continue to improve the lives of all those it touches, *it will have no discernable effect on the downfall of our democratic institutions.*

The historical imperatives we face call for a unified progressive organizing movement for the remainder of this century to build bottom-up institutional power. The strategic objective beckoning to us is to remake the governance of the cities, to win directly democratic control of the jurisdictions in which the majority of our citizens live and work, by the establishing throughout our urban neighborhoods, popular assemblies with public powers—not to replace metropolitan government, but as powerful institutions in their own right to direct and hold accountable the municipal, state and federal officials above them. Is there any other realistic strategic vision or hope for the renewal of American democratic institutions? If so, try naming it.

The test we will face with an increasingly conservative SCOTUS may well dwarf most all of our past history of internal division, conflict and destructive consequences. If this test comes to pass, either we will allow ourselves to become in toto citizen-ciphers in the service of the oligarchy or we will choose to fight from the grassroots to rebuild democracy. If we forego that fight, the future of the United States of America may be foretold in the history of all the other powerful nations that were defeated not by external forces but by their own internal corruption.

More detailed treatment of ideas raised in this essay has been explored in the following publications:

"Public Powers for the Commonwealth: A Challenge to Faith-Based Organizing," *Social Policy* (Winter 2015)

"Directly Democratic Metropolitan Government: Envisioning Beyond Oppression, Rebellion, and Reform," *Social Policy* (Spring 2016)

"Winning the War for Grassroots Empowerment: Benefits of Building a Public Powers Movement," *Social Policy* (Fall 2017)

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